



United States Environmental Protection Agency

Advanced Search

A-Z Index

LEARN THE ISSUES

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

LAWS & REGULATIONS

ABOUT EPA

SEARCH

About EPA Home

Administrator Lisa
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EPA History

EPA Organization Chart

Greening EPA Facilities

Mailing Addresses

Senior Manager
Schedules

Staff Directory

Visiting Headquarters

Visiting a Regional
Office

What We Do

You are here: EPA Home » About EPA » History » Topics » noise
» EPA Identifies Noise Levels Affecting Health and Welfare

EPA Identifies Noise Levels Affecting Health and Welfare

NOTE: In the past, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) coordinated all federal noise control activities through its Office of Noise Abatement and Control. However, in 1981, the Administration at that time concluded that noise issues were best handled at the State or local government level. As a result, the EPA phased out the office's funding in 1982 as part of a shift in federal noise control policy to transfer the primary responsibility of regulating noise to state and local governments. However, the Noise Control Act of 1972 and the Quiet Communities Act of 1978 were not rescinded by Congress and remain in effect today, although essentially unfunded. View more information about noise pollution from EPA's Office of Air and Radiation and in our Frequently Questions database.

[EPA press release - April 2, 1974]

Noise levels requisite to protect public health and welfare against hearing loss, annoyance and activity interference were identified today by the Environmental Protection Agency. These noise levels are contained in a new EPA document, "Information on Levels of Environmental Noise Requisite to Protect Public Health and Welfare with an Adequate Margin of Safety."

One of the purposes of this document is to provide a basis for State and local governments' judgments in setting standards. In doing so the information contained in this document must be utilized along with other relevant factors. These factors include the balance between costs and benefits associated with setting standards at particular noise levels, the nature of the existing or projected noise problems in any particular area, the local aspirations and the means available to control environmental noise.

The document identifies a 24-hour exposure level of 70 decibels as the level of environmental noise which will prevent any measurable hearing loss over a lifetime. Likewise, levels of 55 decibels outdoors and 45 decibels indoors are identified as preventing activity interference and annoyance. These levels of noise are considered those which will permit spoken conversation and other activities such as sleeping, working and recreation, which are part of the daily human condition.

The levels are not single event, or "peak" levels. Instead, they represent averages of acoustic energy over periods of time such as 8 hours or 24 hours, and over long periods of time such as years. For example, occasional higher noise levels would be consistent with a 24-hour energy average of 70 decibels, so long as a sufficient amount of relative quiet is experienced for the remaining period of time.

Noise levels for various areas are identified according to the use of the area. Levels of 45 decibels are associated with indoor residential areas, hospitals and schools, whereas 55 decibels is identified for certain outdoor areas where human activity takes place. The level of 70 decibels is identified for all areas in order to prevent hearing loss.

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